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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 000600

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [IT](#)
SUBJECT: ITALY ENACTS A TOUGH SECURITY LAW IN RESPONSE TO
TIDE OF IMMIGRANTS

REF: A. ROME 205
[¶B. ROME 437](#)
[¶C. ROME 438](#)
[¶D. ROME 439](#)

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Elizabeth L. Dibble for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

Summary
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[¶1.](#) (C//NF) During the week of May 18, the parties of the governing coalition finally reached an accord and passed a tough new security law that will allow the GOI to detain irregular immigrants for up to six months, for the first time classifies irregular immigration as a crime, and gives the legal imprimatur to citizen patrols of urban areas. The law comes just weeks before the elections for the European Parliament, and at a time when the non-stop flow of seaborne irregular immigrants is again dominating the news. In addition to this legislative victory, the government launched joint patrols with Libya of the Libyan coast in an effort to block would-be immigrants from reaching Italy. These moves are particularly popular with the center-right electorate, but are also generally approved by the public at large. During the first week of May, the Italian Navy and Coast Guard intercepted 500 people in international waters and returned them to Libya, prompting a rebuke from the European Union, the UN High Commission for Refugees, and a number of NGOs. Despite this criticism, Italy and Libya have now begun joint patrols of the Libyan coast. According to a senior Italian Interior Ministry official, the goal is to create an environment where immigrants "will not want to come (here) anymore from Libya." End Summary.

After a Delay, A Northern League Victory
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[¶2.](#) (C//NF) For the anti-immigrant Northern League (LN), the security law was a top priority, and its passage represents a significant victory before the elections. The law and the news coverage has focused mostly on seaborne arrivals, although most irregular immigrants overstay visas or enter over land borders. Still, People of Liberty (PDL) member of Parliament Alessio Boncianni told us that the utility of the law was primarily to send a strong message to would-be irregular immigrants that they would not be welcomed in Italy. When members of Parliament from Prime Minister Berlusconi's PDL party refused to back the toughest

anti-immigrant measures, LN termed it a betrayal, and Interior Minister Roberto Maroni declared himself furious. In the final version of the law, LN got most of what it wanted. A key measure that was watered down was the increase in time that an irregular immigrant can be detained. LN wanted the timeframe to go from 90 days to 18 months (the EU maximum). Instead it will increase to 6 months.

¶3. (C) Senior LN contacts tell us that they are "extremely satisfied" with the security package. While LN had to make some concessions, all of its priorities were included in some form. Further, the process required to pass this legislation, according to LN contacts, uniquely brands LN as the party focused on security and limiting irregular immigration. Not only can LN claim a legislative victory on key parts of its electoral platform, it can claim that the party even had to fight with coalition partner PDL to push through what LN regards as essential reforms that are popular with its electoral base. LN expects this legislation to help the party going into the June 6-7 European Parliament elections. PDL coordinator Denis Verdini's chief of staff Gianluca Pileri told us that PDL has increased its anti-immigrant rhetoric in the wake of this LN victory, wanting to insure that its junior coalition partner does not win all of the electoral benefit.

Italian-Libyan Patrols

¶4. (C) The passage of the security law occurred as Italy began its first repatriations of immigrants interdicted in international waters, as called for in the Italy-Libya treaty ratified earlier this year (ref A). Rodolfo Ronconi, the head of border control for the Interior Ministry, told visiting

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NEA/MAG Director Margaret Nardi May 13 that Italy and Libya had begun joint patrols of the Libyan coast in early May. Ronconi said that the Italian Navy and Coast Guard had "returned" 500 intercepted migrants to Libya during the preceding week. The Libyans, however, had asked the Italians to stop such returns, objecting to the image of naval ships from the former colonial power in its ports, and overwhelmed by the numbers. When asked if Italy had ascertained that Libya would treat the immigrants according to international law, Ronconi said Italy considered the matter an "internal issue" for Libya. He added that Italy understood that the migrants were "welcomed back" and settled into camps where humanitarian organizations and journalists had been allowed to visit. The feedback was "not so bad," but Ronconi allowed that international access may have been limited.

¶5. (C) Ronconi then explained the plan for integrated joint patrols scheduled to begin the week of May 18. Italy has provided Libya with three boats, which will fly the Libyan flag and be manned by Libyan crews. Liaison officers from Italy's Guardia di Finanza force will ride on these ships, which will patrol the 12-mile zone of Libyan territorial waters. These ships, whose crews were trained at Gaeta naval base, will constitute the "first net." Italy also plans to provide three additional ships to Libya for such coastal patrols. As a "second net," Italian naval ships will patrol international and territorial waters. A Libyan officer will ride with the Italian navy as a liaison.

¶6. (C) Ronconi said that Libya had stopped "thousands" of immigrants from disembarking from the Libyan coast during the past few weeks. In general, he said the flow of immigrants depended on the attitude of the government of Libya and the weather. He added that an Italian company had prepared a 150 million euro plan for a project to set up a system of border controls on Libya's southern land border, but implementation of the plan was stalled over a misunderstanding about the funding. The Libyans believed the EU had promised to pay for half of the costs of the plans.

¶7. (C) Ronconi said that Italy hoped the upcoming European Parliament elections would result in a victory for political parties that would support a "robust response" to immigration. The Italian goal, he explained, is to create an environment in which the immigrants "will not want to come (here) anymore from Libya."

International Criticism

¶8. (C) Critical international reaction to the migrant repatriations was almost immediate. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a statement May 7 expressing "deep concern" over the repatriations to Libya and calling on Italy to guarantee that "people rescued at sea and in need of international protection receive full access to territory and asylum procedures." Thomas Hammarburg, the Council of Europe's human rights commissioner, said the policy throws out "completely the right to seek asylum," and that it "ignores the possibility of the right to escape from repressive and violent situations." The government has paid little heed to critical voices (particularly from outside Italy). In response to the suggestions that his Interior Minister was out ahead of the government and responding to his own party's priorities, PM Berlusconi May 11 declared his full support for the repatriations, and said that Maroni was simply carrying out the agreement he had made personally with Libyan leader Qaddafi. In the same press conference, Berlusconi went further, saying that boat migrants had been "recruited in a scientific manner by criminal organizations" and rejected the assertions by NGOs and UNHCR that there were true refugees among them.

The View from Lampedusa

¶9. (C) The new law has provoked strong criticism from the mayor of tiny Lampedusa, the island where over 95 percent of seaborne immigrants arrive in Italian territory, over fears that an increase in immigrant holding times will turn Lampedusa into one large detention camp. In 2008, over 31,000 migrants arrived on the island (most rescued by the Italian Coast Guard); the vast majority had embarked from Libyan

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shores. Seventy-five percent of these requested asylum, and 50 percent were granted some form of protection. (Nationally, according to UNHCR, 31,200 persons requested asylum in 2008 and some 8,000 were granted asylum.) Mayor Bernardino de Rubeis, of the Sicily-based Movement for Autonomy (MPA, a party aligned with PDL), told Naples PolOff on May 13 that virtually every one of the island's 6,000 residents opposes the measure. A recent rally in Lampedusa against the GOI's policies including making Lampedusa the home of a major immigrant reception center drew 5,000 people. Sen. Angela Maraventano, a Northern League senator and deputy mayor of Lampedusa, has been harshly criticized by her fellow islanders, but she told us her view that even if Lampedusa must continue hosting immigration centers, extending the length of time immigrants are held will make Lampedusa a less attractive destination for seaborne immigrants and consequently will lead to a decline in the flows over time.

¶10. (C) The local UNHCR representative at the Lampedusa "Center for Identification and Expulsion" (as migrant detention centers are now known) blasted the GOI's new policy of turning migrant boats back to Libya before they reach Italian waters. She noted that Libya is not a party to relevant international refugee conventions and proper screening cannot be conducted there. Migrants arriving on Lampedusa have reported crowded, inadequate shelter, as well as mistreatment and rape at the hands of traffickers and Libyan authorities. The Lampedusa facility has frequently been overcrowded, and housing conditions are very austere. In addition to the UNHCR and IOM, the Red Cross, Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders are present at the

facility.

Comment

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¶11. (C) The tough security law Parliament recently passed is an indicator of the rising anti-immigrant sentiment within Italy. The growing international criticism has not slowed Italian efforts to impede the arrivals of irregular immigrants. In fact, PDL officials tell us that Italy is responding to its electorate by being tough on irregular immigrants, and that it welcomes help from other countries that want to deal with the problem, but that otherwise they should keep their criticism to themselves. The Northern League is likely to enjoy a political dividend in the June 6-7 European elections for its tough stance on immigration. Top PDL officials tell us that as a result of LN's boost in the polls on this issue, Berlusconi has decided to harden his stance. He recently rejected the center left's "multi-ethnic idea" for Italian society, arguing, "that's not our idea." While these chauvinistic policies may reap political benefits in the short term, their effectiveness in the face of immigration pressure is debatable. Another concern is the impact of such policies on Italy's long-term social stability if four million legal residents who are not ethnically Italian (out of a total population of 60 million) are told they are not part of the government's vision of the future of Italy. There are some institutional checks, however. Although international criticism has thus far had a negligible impact on Italian attitudes, continuing criticism from what Italians regard as unimpeachable sources such as the Catholic Church and Italian President Napolitano, are likely to limit the government from resorting to extreme discriminatory practices.

¶12. (U) This cable was drafted with contributions from Consulate Milan and Consulate Naples.
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